

Pandemics, obesity drugs and cancer care: Cambridge experts tackle the health issues shaping the UK



Image: Battling brain cancer | Credit: Adobe Stock assets by Anusorn and Sebastian Kaulitzki

A series of public events brings Cambridge research on future health risks, treatments and inequalities into the national conversation

From pandemic preparedness and the rise of obesity drugs to personalised cancer care, infant health and loneliness as a global public health challenge, researchers at the University of Cambridge and beyond will take on some of the most urgent health questions facing the UK during the Cambridge Festival this March.

Running from **16 March to 2 April**, the festival brings together world-leading scientists, clinicians, legal scholars and patient advocates to share new research, challenge assumptions and open debate on how health risks are changing, and how society, policy and medicine must respond.

Among the most prominent contributors are **Professor Giles Yeo**, one of the UK's best-known voices on obesity and metabolism; **Professors Charlotte Coles and Jean Abraham**, whose research has helped transform breast cancer treatment worldwide; **Dr Suzannah Rihn**, **Professor James Thaventhiran and Professor Ravi Gupta**, leading figures in infectious disease and immunology; and researchers examining loneliness as a rising global health priority, following warnings from the World Health Organization and public health bodies internationally.

One of the Festival's most high-profile health events takes place on 30 March, when **Professor Giles Yeo** tackles one of the most contested questions in modern medicine in ***In a post-Ozempic world, have we cured obesity?*** Focusing on GLP-1 drugs such as Ozempic and Mounjaro, Yeo will explain how these treatments work, why they have transformed obesity care, and what remains unknown about their long-term safety and impact. A professor at the MRC

Metabolic Diseases Unit and a familiar voice on BBC science programmes, Yeo is known for bringing rigorous research on appetite, weight and genetics into the public conversation.

The festival opens its health programme with ***Preparing for the next pandemic*** on 17 March, bringing together Dr Suzannah Rihn, Professor James Thaventhiran and Professor Ravi Gupta from the Cambridge Institute of Therapeutic Immunology and Infectious Disease. The session explores how pandemics begin, how viruses cross species barriers, how vaccines can be made more effective, and how factors such as obesity and ageing shape immune responses. It also addresses the challenge of virus variants, rapid diagnostics and the policy decisions needed to improve global readiness.

Cancer research and care feature strongly throughout the programme. ***The future of breast cancer care*** on 31 March brings together clinicians and patient advocates to explore how team science and lived experience are shaping research that matters to patients. Professor Charlotte Coles, Deputy Head of the Department of Oncology and Co-Director of [Cancer Research UK RadNet Cambridge](#), will discuss clinical trials that have transformed breast radiotherapy, enabling more personalised treatment delivered in just one week, changing practice globally. She is joined by Professor Jean Abraham, Director of the Precision Breast Cancer Institute and Co-Lead of the [Breast Cancer Virtual Institute](#) within the [Cancer Research UK Cambridge Centre](#), whose work in whole-genome sequencing and the PARTNER trial is helping doctors identify smarter, kinder treatments while avoiding unnecessary side effects.

That focus on equity continues in ***Shades of Survival: Confronting global inequalities in breast cancer***, a special screening and discussion on 31 March of the award-winning documentary examining disparities in breast cancer care for Black women across Africa, the UK and the US. Featuring contributions from Cambridge researchers alongside filmmakers and

Another powerful human-centred event, ***Battling brain cancer: Unspoken stories*** on 25 March, brings together patients, carers, clinicians and researchers from the Brain Cancer Virtual Institute within the Cancer Research UK Cambridge Centre during Brain Cancer Awareness Month. Through first-hand accounts and discussion, the session shines a light on a disease that remains one of the most challenging to diagnose and treat, underscoring the importance of awareness, research and collaboration.

Public health is explored from multiple angles, including the environment. ***From dirty air to heatwaves: The environmental roots of long-term health conditions*** on 23 March examines how air pollution, rising temperatures and chemical exposure increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes and cancer, and what can be done to build healthier, more resilient communities in a changing climate.

The social and economic determinants of health are also central. In ***The cost-of-living crisis and the first 1,000 days of life*** on 26 March, Dr Cara Ruggiero and Dr Marie Spreckley share findings from the [SPROUT study](#), revealing how food insecurity affects infant feeding, to inform future research to prevent childhood obesity and promote long-term health, with implications for public health guidance and policy. On the same day, ***Raising the bar for global health: Why global health is local health*** highlights how international health partnerships improve outcomes both overseas and within the UK through reciprocal learning.

Loneliness as a growing public health concern is explored in ***The Lonely Planet: Are we experiencing a new global health crisis?*** on 18 March. Drawing on WHO warnings and global data, researchers examine how loneliness is experienced across the life course, why it is rising despite digital connectivity, and how society might respond as technology and AI reshape everyday life.

Scientific innovation underpins many of the festival's health events. ***AI and the future of public health*** on 25 March explores how artificial intelligence could be used responsibly to predict disease outbreaks, improve services and strengthen communities. ***The future of nanomedicine*** on 21 March sees Professor Ljiljana Fruk explain how nanotechnology may change how we diagnose, repair and restore the body, while ***The holistic immune system: Nerves, hormones and getting old*** on 27 March brings together Professors Menna Clatworthy, David Thomas and Eoin McKinney to uncover hidden regulators of immunity, from stress responses to metabolism and ageing.

Understanding the body at a fundamental level is the focus of ***What makes us human?*** on 26 March, where Professor Ben Simons traces how a single cell gives rise to the complexity of the human body, and how decades of curiosity-driven research now inform our understanding of disease and ageing.

Health law and ethics are addressed in the 2026 **Baron de Lancey Lecture** on 18 March, delivered by Professor Sir Ian Kennedy KC (Hon) FBA, one of the UK's foremost authorities on medical law and ethics. Reflecting on autonomy, truth and trust in modern healthcare, Sir Ian draws on a career that has shaped patient rights, accountability and health governance.

Together, these events reflect a growing recognition that the next decade of health will be defined not by single diseases, but by the interaction of biology, environment, inequality and policy, and by the choices societies make now to protect future generations.

The Cambridge Festival runs from 16 March to 2 April 2026. The full programme and tickets are available from 16 February [here](#).

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Press images are available [here](#) | **Festival images** are available [here](#).

About the Cambridge Festival: The Cambridge Festival, a multidisciplinary event hosted by the University of Cambridge, is designed to showcase the best in research and innovation. With a diverse range of topics, from science and technology to the arts and humanities, the festival invites the public to engage with experts and ignite their curiosity.

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